

CASE STUDY: University of Virginia

Can one student make an impact by providing an entire campus with the access to renewable energy? Based on a news article in the Cavalier Daily, the University of Virginia's student newspaper, it appears that the answer is "yes." We recently spoke with Tatiana Sokolova, the senior engineering student who spearheaded the project to install the first solar table charging station on UVA's campus, to learn more.

Following a Global Sustainability semester project, Sokolova turned her idea of having a solar powered charging station for students into a reality. She was initially struck with the idea after overhearing several students grumble about the shortage of phone charging outlets while outdoors, combined with a desire to take advantage of the campus's many open spaces. Designed by Thomas Jefferson, the university has a plethora of open areas, including the Lawn, the epicenter of Jefferson's Academical Village, which was intended to serve as an alfresco classroom. "Most students would like to be able to work outside and enjoy the campus instead of being confined to the library," Sokolova explained.

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After a significant amount of research, Sokolova and the university decided on the Sunbolt. "We did a lot of research on solar tables...we liked that the Sunbolt continues to function in the rain and does not have to be bolted down, which will allow us the availability to move the table to a different location on campus in the future," Sokolova stated.

The Sunbolt has already been used to showcase the benefits of sustainability to students and visitors. "During our campus tours we take prospective students to the table. It is a great way to show the university's green initiative and teach kids about solar first-hand," said Sokolova. In order to finance the project, Sokolova applied for several grants to finance the project. "We received funding from the Parents Grant, from the Green Initiative Funding Tomorrow, and from our Facilities Management budget," Sokolova expounded.

The table was chosen for funding to serve as a poster for the campus' sustainability projects. The table serves as a visible reminder of the university's commitment to sustainability. Unlike solar panels that are often mounted on rooftops and out of sight, the Sunbolt resides in a highly trafficked area on campus where it will be seen daily by students and faculty.

During the table installation, passersby were seen stopping and curiously examining the table. They were intrigued by the idea of having a comfortable seating area where they could complete their assignments outdoors.

Sokolova stated that, "So far the table has been very well received. Both the students and the faculty have responded positively to the table."